

## Character Class

# Incarnates with Class

By Skip Williams



This column aims to provide players with tips on creating effective and interesting characters of various types. So whether you're a beginning player creating your very first character or an experienced gamer looking to put some punch into an old standby, this column is for you!

## The Pros and Cons of an Incarnate

The incarnate class, detailed in *Magic of Incarnum*, uses the game's alignment system to create a character that personifies one of the four extreme alignment aspects -- chaos, evil, good, or law. Thus, an incarnate becomes a living exemplar of his chosen alignment, and his powers serve to make his example concrete and memorable to those he encounters.

### Incarnate Assets

An incarnate has access to a suite of supernatural abilities that reflect his alignment and usually enhance his power in some fashion. He can share a few of these enhancements with allies, and he also brings some offensive supernatural power to his party. Your incarnate can be a vigilante, a champion of his beliefs, or a highly principled wielder of the soul-based magic known as incarnum. Below are several assets you have going for you when you choose an incarnate.

- **Meldshaping:** An incarnate can shape soulmelds from raw incarnum - the stuff of souls. Shaping a soulmeld is analogous to casting a spell, though the soulmeld appears more like a magic item made of pure energy. An incarnate can employ any soulmeld on his class list, subject to certain alignment restrictions (see the Weaknesses section), but he has a daily limit on the number of soulmelds he can shape, as given in the class description. An incarnate also has access to a pool of supernatural power called *essentia* that he can use each day to wring some extra benefits from his soulmelds.

Starting at 2nd level, an incarnate can make his soulmelds more powerful or useful (or both) by tying them to different parts of his body. The available body locations are called *chakras*, and they correspond to the spots where a character can wear magic items. The process of improving a soulmeld by tying it to a body part is called *binding* it to a *chakra*. But once an incarnate has bound a soulmeld in this way, he cannot benefit from a magic item worn at the same location. He may not even be able to wear a magic item at the same location as a bound soulmeld, depending on the latter's exact nature.

At 4th, 9th, 14th, 16th, and 19th levels, the incarnate gains the ability to bind soulmelds to more *chakras*.

- **Good Fortitude and Will Saves:** An incarnate uses the best save progression in the game for Fortitude



and Will saves (see Table 3-1 in the *Player's Handbook*). This natural resilience helps him resist most effects that attack his body, such as poison, polymorphing, and energy draining, as well as assaults on his mind or spirit.

- **Detect Opposition:** At will, an incarnate can detect alignment auras that are opposed to his own. For example, a good incarnate can detect evil auras, and a lawful incarnate can detect chaotic auras. The power works like the *detect evil* spell and is quite handy for ferreting out hidden or otherwise unsuspected foes.
- **Fair Weapon Selection:** The incarnate is proficient only with simple weaponry. Though simple weapons aren't the most deadly ones available, the fact that the incarnate has access to the whole category gives him more options than most other arcane spellcasters have. That versatility can be a lifesaver if his soulmelds happen to fail him.
- **Expanded Soulmeld Capacity:** Normally, a character using soulmelds can invest only a limited amount of essentia in a single soulmeld. This limit is based on character level, as shown on page 19 in *Magic of Incarnum*. But at 3rd level and again at 15th level, an incarnate's essentia limit for a single soulmeld increases by +1. This extra essentia allows the incarnate to make his soulmelds more powerful than usual.
- **Incarnum Radiance:** Starting at 3rd level, an incarnate can emit supernatural power that creates a visible aura around his body once per day. The aura's appearance and effects vary with the incarnate's alignment, as noted in the class description. The incarnate gains one extra daily use of his incarnum radiance power at 8th, 13th, and 18th level.
- **Rapid Meldshaping:** Starting at 5th level, an incarnate can take an already shaped soulmeld and immediately shape it into a different one. (This power has certain limitations, as noted in the incarnate class description.) He can reshape one soulmeld per day at 5th level, two per day at 11th level, and three per day at 17th level.
- **Share Incarnum Radiance:** Starting at 7th level, an incarnate can literally spread his incarnum radiance around and share its effects with any allies within 30 feet who share his alignment. Doing so causes him to become fatigued after the effect ends. Starting at 17th level, however, sharing incarnum radiance no longer fatigues him.
- **Perfect Meldshaper:** At 20th level, an incarnate can boost the essentia he currently has invested in his soulmelds for a short time once per day. Since this boost increases the essentia invested to the maximum possible for each soulmeld, the incarnate could effectively have more essentia invested than he actually has available.
- **True Incarnation:** Upon reaching 20th level, an incarnate gains the outsider type and a subtype corresponding to his non-neutral alignment component.

## Incarnate Weaknesses

As with any class in the **D&D** game, the incarnate's advantages come at a price. Below are a few of the disadvantages you should keep in mind if you're considering an incarnate character.

- **Poor Reflex Saving Throws:** Incarnates have the worst progression for Reflex saves in the game (see Table 3-1 in the *Player's Handbook*). Thus, they aren't so great at avoiding effects that fill whole areas.
- **Fairly Low Hit Points:** The incarnate's 6-sided Hit Dice give him only a moderate number of hit points. To make matters worse, soulmelds don't pack much offensive punch, and many combat-oriented soulmelds

require the incarnate to make melee attacks, or at least get fairly close to his foes. Thus, the typical incarnate needs to enter combat at least occasionally but can't take much physical punishment.

- **Moderate Armor Class:** The fact that an incarnate is proficient with medium armor and with all shields except tower shields leaves him with a decent, but not great Armor Class. The combination of modest hit points and only fair Armor Class means an incarnate can afford to fight a little, but he doesn't have much staying power in a prolonged battle. Some soulmelds and incarnum radiance powers improve Armor Class, though using a soulmeld (and possibly essentia) depletes the incarnate's resources.
- **Poor Attack Bonus:** An incarnate's base attack bonus is +1 per two incarnate levels, which is the worst in the game. Thus, physical combat isn't a great option for an incarnate unless he has some help from his soulmelds -- and perhaps his incarnum radiance, too.
- **Low Skill Points:** At a mere two skill points per level, most incarnates don't accumulate many skill ranks, even with quadruple skill points at 1st level. A high Intelligence score can offset the lack of skill points somewhat, but most incarnates need high Constitution and Wisdom scores more than they need a few extra skill points.
- **Narrow Skill Selection:** An incarnate has only a handful of class skills that he can purchase with his tiny allotment of skill points.
- **Restricted Alignment:** An incarnate's alignment must have one, and only one, neutral component. He also has a fairly strong alignment aura that divination spells can detect.
- **Limited Magical Options:** An incarnate's ability to use any soulmeld on his class list opens up many possibilities. However, even the most experienced incarnate can handle only a few soulmelds each day. In addition, an incarnate cannot use any soulmeld with an alignment descriptor opposed to his own. For example, a good incarnate cannot use soulmelds with the evil descriptor. Furthermore, soulmelds are at their most potent when bound to chakras, and a chakra to which a soulmeld is bound cannot also hold a functioning magic item -- a fact that further limits the incarnate's magical options.

## Playing a Classy Incarnate

Great incarnates usually use the following techniques, so if you're playing one, try to build your strategy around these concepts.

## Be an Advocate for Your Alignment

Your supernatural power arises from your wholehearted devotion to your alignment, which you regard as a pure and unblemished ideal. Your alignment and your dedication to it shouldn't be a secret from your companions, but go easy on them! Making your alignment seem like the greatest one in the world should be your goal, but don't harp on it so much that you become tiresome to your companions.

## Choose a Role

The versatility that your soulmelds provide allows you to fill many different roles in an adventuring party, though your alignment -- and hence your incarnum radiance ability -- makes some roles more feasible than others. For example, if you're a good-aligned incarnate, your incarnum radiance ability improves your Armor Class. Coupling that benefit with soulmelds that improve your melee combat abilities can make you quite an effective fighting character, especially against certain kinds of foes. In like manner, you can use soulmelds to become adept at scouting, or simply at blasting foes to cinders. When choosing a role for yourself, be sure to consult with your allies and be prepared to do what your party needs.

## Use Those Soulmelds

Though you have only a limited number of soulmelds and essentia points available to you each day, it doesn't pay to keep a big reserve. Many soulmelds last until you decide to unshape them, so get those soulmelds working for you!

When choosing soulmelds, look for combinations that work well with each other and with your incarnum radiance power. Choose combinations that give you bonuses that stack or abilities that complement each other. For example, if you're neutral good, your incarnum radiance power (which improves your Armor Class) pairs well with soulmelds such as *bloodwar gauntlets*, *lightning gauntlets*, or *armguards of disruption*, all of which rely on melee attacks. But try to avoid combinations in which one element makes another less effective. For example, if your incarnum radiance power makes you harder to hit, you might want to avoid soulmelds such as *mantle of flame*, which damages foes that strike you with melee attacks.

## Be Adaptable

It's great to choose a role and work at filling it, but you can also change roles fairly quickly just by shaping new soulmelds. You can employ soulmelds to improve your mobility, perception, fighting ability and more. So be ready to take on a new role when necessary.

## Fitting in

No matter how well you design your combination of soulmelds, you can't do it all alone Exactly how you can work



best with your allies depends on the soulmelds you've shaped, but here are a few suggestions.

**The Party's Main Fighter:** No matter what role you're filling in a party, the primary fighter can benefit from sharing your incarnum radiance power. If you've focused on combat, keep in mind that this character probably has a better Armor Class and more hit points than you do. A fighter-type is also equipped to handle a wider array of foes than you are. So be ready to make a strategic withdrawal or move into a flanking position when the circumstances warrant. It's never great to abandon an ally in the midst of a battle, but you'll have a better chance of surviving if you back off for a while and then rejoin the fight in time to finish off a dangerous opponent.

**The Party Scout:** You can support your party's rogue, ranger, or monk in many ways while she explores the route ahead. Depending on your soulmelds, you may also be able to fill this role yourself, or at least accompany the scout. Soulmelds such as *acrobat boots*, *airstep sandals*, and *cerulean sandals* make you mobile enough to function effectively as a scout, or to rescue a scout who has gotten into trouble. Soulmelds such as *theft gloves*, *keeneye lenses*, or *truthseeker goggles* can help you function as the party scout on a fulltime basis or fill in for a fallen scout.

**The Party's Divine Spellcaster:** You're likely to need some healing spells to stay alive and healthy no matter how you play your character, so it pays to stay friendly with your party's cleric, paladin, or druid. But you can expect no end of trouble if your group's divine spellcaster doesn't appreciate your alignment. In such a case, your best bet is to discuss ways for one of you (that is, you or the divine spellcaster with the incompatible alignment) to leave the party.

Assuming that you and the party's divine spellcaster can stay on friendly terms, it pays for the two of you to compare magical notes. Try to coordinate your soulmelds with the divine spellcaster's spell selection so the two of you can deal with as many situations as possible.

**The Party's Arcane Spellcaster:** You probably have more hit points and a better Armor Class than any arcane spellcaster in your group, except possibly the bard. So try to stay close enough to these characters to protect them if a foe breaks through the front line. It also pays to compare notes with your group's arcane spellcasters, as noted in the section on divine spellcasters.

## Some Key Equipment

You're all about your soulmelds, but the right gear can help you quite a bit in your career. The essentials include the following.

**Armor:** When you're beginning play as an incarnate, get the best medium armor you can afford (probably scale mail), plus a heavy shield. Other defensive items, such as *rings of protection* and *amulets of natural armor*, can prove helpful as well. Keep in mind that several lesser items whose benefits stack give you better protection, and at a cheaper price, than one big item. And since you're going to need your chakras for soulmelds, don't become too dependent on defensive items. The Split Chakra feat can help you there by allowing an item and a soulmeld to occupy the same chakra.

**Melee Weapon:** Hand-to-hand combat is an option for you, especially if you prefer soulmelds that emphasize combat. However, you're limited to simple weapons unless you spend a feat slot. A morningstar or heavy mace is a good choice that deals decent damage. A spear deals as much damage as either of those weapons and is useful for probing surfaces for unseen dangers as well. It's two-handed, though, so using it keeps you from employing a shield. But if you're willing to give up your shield and its Armor Class boost for a spear, consider a longspear, which has reach and thus can help keep foes a little farther off.

**Backup Melee Weapon:** Always keep a light weapon -- or two -- handy. A light slashing weapon, such as a dagger or hand axe, can help get you out of a tight spot (such as being swallowed whole by a big monster). It also pays to have a hefty weapon on hand in case you lose your primary one or find that it isn't effective. Make sure this weapon deals a different kind of damage than your primary weapon does. For example, if you normally use a heavy mace (a bludgeoning weapon) consider a shortspear (a piercing weapon) as a backup.

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## About the Author

**Skip Williams** keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies, and he served as the Sage of **Dragon** Magazine for eighteen years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not his friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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